

Council: No progress on homelessness goal

Numbers rising despite plan to solve problem by 2012

by Margie Hyslop
Staff Writer

Montgomery County has fallen far behind in its goal to end homelessness by 2012, County Council members said Monday.

Two years after the County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) and the council endorsed a plan to end homelessness within 10 years, the number of people living on the streets, in shelters and in supported housing has increased by 55 percent to 1,630 people.

Also, the county has fallen far short of its goal of building 100 subsidized or affordable housing units annually.

Even if the first year is not counted because the program had just started, the county is about 143 units behind, said George L. Leventhal, chairman of the council's Health and Human Services Committee.

"I've had a question all along, and I still have it, as to whether the homelessness issue is being addressed by the executive branch as it should be addressed," said Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, who as council vice president is in line to lead the council next year.

"None of us have given this issue the urgency it deserves," Leventhal said.

"We have all these plans — I think we need to put them aside and focus on the numbers," said Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park.

According to counts done on one day in January of each year, the number of Montgomery residents who are homeless rose from 1,049 in 2003 to 1,630 in 2005.

Among them, almost two-thirds were literally homeless, according to the census done Jan. 26. That means about 1.2 of every 1,000 Montgomery residents is living on the streets, in a shelter or in temporary quarters that they cannot count on keeping.

That ratio is only slightly better

of Housing and Community Affairs director, Elizabeth Davison, told members of the council's HHS and Planning, Housing and Economic Development committees.

"More people are becoming homeless because there's not enough housing — someone will become sick in the family, they'll get behind, they'll get evicted," Davison said.

Although the county has focused on making sure that children are not homeless, the number of homeless families has risen more than 69 percent since 2003, while the number of homeless single adults is up almost 41 percent.

Two years ago, Duncan directed Davison to lead an interagency task force — composed of department directors for social services, schools, planning and housing — to find housing for more homeless and severely disabled residents.

In 2004, the council appointed Corrine Stevens as chief of special needs housing, but council members said the position has not carried the power needed to make sure goals are met.

"Who is responsible?" asked council President

Thomas E. Perez (D-Dist. 5) of Takoma Park.

"All of us jointly," Davison answered.

"That's the problem," Leventhal said.

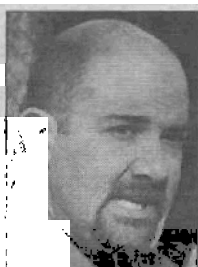
"I don't think the structure is conducive to making progress at a pace [we need]," Perez said.

Stevens said the loss of federal housing subsidies has left a big hole that county government has to decide whether and how much it will fill.

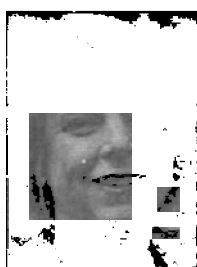
The financing for ending homelessness will not work if that gap is not filled, Stevens said.

Leventhal said he wants the Duncan administration to bring the council, within 90 days, a strategy with "a real goal, real time frame" for providing more housing.

Montgomery will find a way to fill the hole that federal and state cuts to housing subsidies and social programs have opened, said Duncan spokesman David S. Weaver.



Leventhal



Floreen

than the regional suburban average of 1.4. When Washington, D.C., is included, the regional average is 2.6 homeless out of every 1,000 residents.

The scarcity of affordable housing in the county, where the median price for all housing is \$380,000 and the median price for an existing condominium is \$210,000, is an obstacle to meeting the goal, the county's Department

The administration is "on target" to meet the goal of eliminating homelessness by 2012 and will work to "leverage private funds" to close the gap, he said..

"There is no jurisdiction in the nation that is doing more to create and preserve affordable housing than Montgomery County is, and we're doing it in a way that does not concentrate it [in sections] of the county," Weaver said.